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Multilingualism

Report of the Secretary-General

1. In its resolution 50/11 of 2 November 1995, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit, at its fifty-second session, a report on the implementation of the resolution, particularly on the use of the official languages of the United Nations and the working languages of the Secretariat. Accordingly, the following report on multilingualism in the Secretariat has been prepared in response to that request.

Learning of languages

2. The Secretary-General is committed to promoting the learning of all official languages and the working languages of the Secretariat by Secretariat staff and to ensuring adequate human and financial resources for maintaining the teaching of all official and working languages. It is reaffirmed in the report on implementation of the Organization's human resources strategy (A/C.5/51/1), and further reflected in the Secretary-General's budget submission for the biennium 1998-1999, which maintains resources for language training to support the learning of the official languages at all levels, to ensure that languages learned can be used in the working environment and to promote respect for the Organization's linguistic and cultural diversity.

3. Language training programmes are offered at all major duty stations. At Headquarters the core language training programme continues to provide beginning, intermediate and advanced courses in the six official languages. In order to tailor the language training to specific requirements of the Organization, special courses are offered to enhance linguistic skills for work-related purposes. These include courses in both of the working languages in drafting letters, memoranda and reports and making oral presentations. Additional specialized courses such as "Lectures francophones", "The news in Spanish", "Russian through the media", "Reading Arabic newspapers" and a media-assisted Chinese course aim at increasing fluency in the official languages of the United Nations and promoting multicultural understanding and respect for diversity.

4. Self-study centres are being established, where resources permit, to support the core programme and promote the use and maintenance of skills in the official languages. Self-study facilities allow staff members to use a variety of materials in various media — print, audiotape, videotape, computer and multimedia — for language study at their own pace and on their own schedule.

5. Following the adoption of General Assembly resolution 50/11, the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources Management, in information circular ST/IC/1995/73 of 8 November 1995, drew the attention of staff to the resolution and encouraged all staff members to make full use of the language training facilities available to them in the Secretariat.

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Language incentives

6. In order to encourage the learning and use of the official languages, incentives are provided to staff members who pass proficiency examinations in the official languages of the Organization, in addition to the two working languages of the Secretariat. Language proficiency examinations in the six official languages are conducted twice a year at over 100 test sites to staff members throughout the United Nations system. For staff members in the Professional category and above, the intervals between salary increments are reduced to 10 months (for grade levels P-1 to P-5) and to 20 months (for grade levels D-1 and D-2), in the case of staff subject to geographical distribution who have an adequate and confirmed knowledge of a second official language. A language allowance is payable to staff in the General Service and related categories and in the Field Service category who have demonstrated proficiency in any two official United Nations languages. A second language allowance is payable for proficiency demonstrated by passing the prescribed examination in a third official language.

Recruitment and promotion

7. All candidates recruited for the Secretariat are required to have a full command of one of the two working languages of the Secretariat. Candidates recruited through the national competitive examination may elect to take the exam in either of the two working languages. In posts where knowledge of an additional official language is required, for example, at the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, where Spanish is a working language of the Commission, knowledge of the language will be included as a job specification in the vacancy announcement.

8. Linguistic proficiency is one of the criteria used in the selection, assignment or promotion of staff of the Secretariat. Knowledge of languages is included as a factor in the evaluation form utilized by programme managers and appointment and promotion bodies to assess the relative competence and suitability of candidates. The Office of Human Resources Management highlights the language qualifications of applicants for posts in all its presentations to departments, drawing the attention of programme managers to General Assembly resolution 50/11 on multilingualism and the need to ensure linguistic balance within the Organization. Programme managers are advised that linguistic proficiency should be taken into account in the selection of candidates.

Use of working languages

9. By virtue of his or her appointment, every staff member is required to work in either English or French. In addition, since the regional commissions for Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean and Western Asia also have Russian, Spanish and Arabic, respectively, as a working language, many staff members in the secretariats of those bodies are required to work in the respective language. To promote multilingualism in the Secretariat, staff members are encouraged to make equal use of the working languages in their official communications.

Recruitment and training of translators

10. In spite of several waves of post reduction that have affected the Secretariat as a whole over the past five years, owing to minor staffing table increases in the translation services over the same period those services have now essentially the same staffing levels that they had at the end of 1993, following the redeployment of a number of translator posts to other parts of the Secretariat. The end of the freeze of vacant posts in April 1997 has allowed management to resume the recruitment of translators from the rosters of successful candidates who passed competitive examinations in all six official languages of the Organization. Given the relative stabilization of the volume of parliamentary documentation received for translation and the steady use of contractual translation in this operation (roughly 15 per cent of the material processed), it can be said that established staff resources at their current level, supplemented as necessary by temporary assistance during peak workload periods, are appropriate to ensure proper translation of all documentation in the six official languages. While quality and timeliness improvements are still needed, it is felt that the former can be addressed through adjustments in the methods of work, and the latter are largely beyond the reach of the processing services, contingent as they are on improvements in the pattern of submission of documentation by author departments.

11. In a context of limited human resources, special emphasis on training has been one important way for the Organization and in particular Conference Services to pursue the objective of improved performance. The training of translators after they have joined Conference Services should certainly not be understood in the academic sense: all translators are recruited through a highly selective competitive examination restricted to university graduates, which is a guarantee of solid professional qualifications.

Nevertheless, during the first two years of their employment with the United Nations, new translators must go through a probationary period during which their work is closely monitored by experienced revisers acting as training officers. During that period, new translators are gradually familiarized with the specific requirements of translation at the United Nations. For those new recruits who are assigned to duty stations other than New York, there is a mandatory six months training period at Headquarters. Perhaps even more important for the quality of the output of the translation services is the training of relatively experienced translators in self-revision. Taking into account their academic background and demonstrated areas of strength after a few years of experience, they are specialized in various subject matters. After that and subject to consistently satisfactory performance, they are asked to produce self-revised translations that are subject to quality-control by revisers and senior revisers. Systematic feedback is provided in the form of corrections to their translations and one-on-one discussions with revisers. Finally, translators are given the opportunity throughout their career to expand and/or improve their language skills by attending courses of study made available by the Office of Human Resources Management or at various universities.

Simultaneous distribution of documents

12. The simultaneous distribution of documents in all official languages, a practice that the Secretariat had always endeavoured to follow, has been applied strictly since the adoption on 10 December 1981 of General Assembly resolution 36/117 B, in which the Assembly established the rule. The same principle was later confirmed in the context of Assembly resolution 42/207 C, of 11 December 1987, on the need to ensure respect for the equal treatment of the official languages, and is regularly reiterated in the resolutions adopted yearly by the Assembly on meetings and documentation issues.

13. Simultaneous distribution means that no language version of a particular document, including the original language, is released for dissemination until the production of all the relevant versions is completed and all of them can be distributed at the same time. The rule of simultaneous distribution applies to documents intended for the information of and consideration by all United Nations organs, for example, reports of the Secretary-General, including major policy documents like the medium-term plan and the proposed programme budget; reports of intergovernmental, expert, oversight and treaty bodies and special rapporteurs; communications from States; draft reports and draft decisions to be adopted by the relevant bodies; agendas and programmes of work; and resolutions and decisions.

14. The optical disk system, which is the official repository and distribution outlet of electronic versions of United Nations documents, also operates in accordance with the simultaneous distribution rule: the electronic versions become accessible through the system at the same time in all languages, immediately following the release of their hard-copy equivalents.

Informal meetings

15. In section I, paragraph 8, of its resolution 40/243 of 18 December 1985, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to continue to provide interpretation services for informal meetings on an ad hoc basis in accordance with established practice. Subsequently, in paragraph 13 of its resolution 50/206 A of 23 December 1995, the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to provide, within the resources approved for conference services for the biennium 1996-1997, interpretation services for meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States upon request by those groupings, taking into account the priority due to meetings included in the calendar of conferences. The following year, in paragraph 19 of its resolution 51/211 A of 18 December 1996, the Assembly reiterated its request to the Secretary-General to provide, within the resources requested for conference services for the biennium 1998-1999, interpretation services for meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States upon request by those groupings, taking into account the priority due to meetings included in the calendar of conferences.

16. In conformity with the aforementioned resolutions, interpretation services in the languages requested and conference facilities are accorded to regional and other major groupings of Member States on an "as available" basis, that is, if such services or facilities are available or if cancellations of other scheduled meetings allow the reassignment of staff or rooms. As long as such meetings requiring conference services are held at the level of services authorized for the session of a particular body, no problems arise. Additional meetings beyond that level, however, can be serviced only as existing resources permit. Services are also provided on an "as available" basis for such other informal meetings as briefings for delegations and bodies

that request to convene informally outside their scheduled sessions.

Library services and data banks

17. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library, which, in accordance with the basic policy formulated in 1949 and reaffirmed ever since, is a multilingual research, information and training facility, maintains the archival collection of United Nations documents and publications in all languages in which they are issued. Also acquired, more selectively but generally in one or both of the two working languages of the Secretariat, are documents and publications of specialized agencies and intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. Gazettes and national laws of each Member State are acquired in their original language and, wherever available, in one of the two working languages of the Secretariat.

18. The language of material in the balance of the collections is determined by demand and/or request. Thus, in the collections of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, English is the predominant language followed by French, Spanish, Russian, Arabic and Chinese respectively. Other languages have significant representation, most notably German.

19. On-line and other electronic databases follow the same pattern of language predominance but, as more products become available in a wider variety of languages, a shift in the linguistic representation of these databases is becoming more noticeable.

20. Additionally, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library has made it a priority to provide multiple dedicated Internet workstations in order to provide its client base with the opportunity of accessing, retrieving and downloading information, independently or with the assistance of a librarian, without prejudice to any language.

21. Products evolving from the new technologies, specifically the optical disk system and the United Nations Internet Web site, have enabled the Organization to make selected United Nations documentation in all languages accessible worldwide. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library makes a substantial contribution to this effort by providing on-line indexing, posting of research guides, databases, etc., on the United Nations home page. If the products are in English, links are made from other language pages.

22. Access to United Nations documentation is also made through the United Nations Bibliographic Information System (UNBIS), which is based on the trilingual Thesaurus File. Under study for future development are the possibilities of trilingual (English/French/Spanish) search capabilities and machine-assisted translation of indexing data into the official languages of the Organization.

23. Another initiative of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library has been to provide an extensive training programme in the management, organization and use of United Nations documentation and various electronic information resources. Whenever there is sufficient demand, individual courses are organized in languages other than English.

24. In summation, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library continues to recognize and respond to the necessity for an equitable representation of information, and access thereto, in the official languages of the Organization.

Conclusion

25. As indicated above, the Secretariat has continually followed a policy of promoting the learning and use of the official and working languages of the Organization in all its activities. In response to General Assembly resolution 50/11, efforts to that end have been intensified with a view to ensuring that promotion of multilingualism remains an organizational imperative.